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# Wim Wenders' Most Ambitious Film

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**Abstract:** *Until the End of the World* by Wim Wenders was a large project. This essay discusses the slow process of the film's creation, its distribution, its content and critical response, in order to point at failure as the question key to each of those topics. Purpose, success, resolution, ending, the end of the world – those notions appear either irrelevant or impossible in the context of this film. The research material consists mainly of reviews and director's comments. Content analysis displays many references to classic film genres, references which, however, prove dysfunctional. An important theme of the movie is wandering. This is a recurring motif in Wenders's work, which some interpretations derive from the identity-seeking typical of his generation. In his case, this search is often expressed by crossing state borders. Central Europe is nevertheless poorly represented in his work.

**Keywords:** road movie; flaneurism; open ending; science fiction; dreams

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*Until the End of the World* (*Bis ans Ende der Welt*; Wenders, 1991) was promoted as “the ultimate road movie” (Kelley, 2004). Besides the road movie convention, critics also noticed elements of detective, spy, gangster, burlesque, horror, music video, home movie and romantic genres.

The action takes place, among other sites, in Venice, Paris, Berlin, Lisbon, Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, San Francisco, the Australian Northern Territory and, in the final scenes, on the Earth's orbit. In the initial versions of the script, it was also to take place in Brazil, in Bilbao, in Iceland and among Congolese Pygmies; the presence of the latter has been marked in the audio layer, with the use of a Pygmy children's song that the protagonists listen to in their car.

The movie soundtrack features songs by Wenders' favourite artists, written especially for this film by Nick Cave, Neneh Cherry, Elvis Costello, Crime & the City Solution, Depeche Mode, Peter Gabriel, Lou Reed, R.E.M., Patti Smith, Talking Heads and U2, among others.

The period in which the film was created, including the time during which the ideas for it were emerging, can be placed between the years 1978 and 1991, but it was not widely available in the form that the director had intended until December 2019.

I would like to trace the phenomenon of this film endeavour – from its beginning, both riddled with uncountable dangers and oddly optimistic – which despite teetering on the edge of failure, was ultimately brought to fruition in a form that many consider successful. It is worth mentioning that failure is one of the great subjects of this movie, consistently explored both on the plane of the storyline and of the narration.

The first idea for a science fiction film came to Wenders' mind when he completed his 1977–1978 journey around the world in the Australian desert (Ciment et al., 1991/1992). The film was meant to be set in the near future – the year 1999, when direct transmission of images between the human brain and the computer would be possible. In the early 1980s, Wim Wenders became romantically involved with the actress Solveig Dommartin, who would later play the main roles in the discussed film and in *Wings of Desire* (Wenders, 1987). The couple started working on a script that transformed Peer Gynt's story, where Solveig, instead of waiting passively for her beloved for half a century, embarked on a journey around the world to find him. Dommartin and Wenders also travelled around the world. Around 1984, when the journey was drawing to its end, once again in Australia, Wenders came to the conclusion that the combination of the two ideas born of the two journeys would produce a more interesting effect.

Due to lack of funds, the shooting of *Until the End of the World* did not start until April 1990. The budget was \$23 million.<sup>1</sup> The initial version of the film after editing was 9 hours long. It was then shortened to 6 hours, which was still an unacceptable length for the producers. To the director's despair, the cinema version was drastically reduced to 3 hours,<sup>2</sup> and Wenders himself referred to it as the "Reader's Digest version". The film in this form was badly received by the critics and earned over 27 times less than it cost. It quickly ended its run, but Wenders made a secret copy of the negative and, in violation of the contract, edited a five-hour-long director's cut (Horton, 1997),<sup>3</sup> divided into three parts. The entire trilogy was shown several times at special screenings with the director. Due to legal constraints, the DVD could only be released in a few countries. Thus, a movie born out of numerous journeys, shot during a journey and depicting a journey was condemned to roaming in the post-production and distribution phases. Then the film's 4K reconstruction premiered on 7 March 2015 during a retrospective of Wim Wenders at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Next, the film once again toured 15 North American cities (Hoffman, 2016). The 4K version runs 287 minutes long and, unlike the earlier director's cut, is presented as a whole. In December 2019, it was released on Blu-ray and DVD in the USA (*Until the End of the World: Alternate versions*, n.d.).

The sheer monumentality of this endeavour nearly doomed the movie to failure. The very idea of making an artistic super production was risky. Moreover, many of the plans

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1 This is over four times less than the most expensive production of that year (*Terminator 2: Judgement Day*; Cameron, 1991), which cost USD 94 million, but more than some Oscar-winning films of those times, such as *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) – with USD 22 million, *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) – USD 19 million, or *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) – USD 22 million of budget.

2 According to David Tacon, the 179-minute version was intended for the Japanese, European and Australian markets, while the 158-minute one – for the American market and for distribution on VHS tapes (Tacon, 2003). In Poland, *Filmowy Serwis Prasowy* and A. Garbicz in *Gazeta Wielkopolska* quoted a 158-minute runtime. *Film na Świecie* and *Kino* wrote about the 179-minute version.

3 Other sources cite the length of 280 minutes (Kell, 2010).

were mutually exclusive: shooting in all the planned locations, leaving aside the issue of budget, would have been physically impossible owing to the admissible movie length, even if that had been negotiable. In the face of the multitude of elements that were to be included in the film, its artistic value was questionable all along the way. There was also the problem of fitting in all the music that had been sent in. Wenders invited cooperation from 18 bands, assuming that only half of them would answer (Van-Airsdale & Wenders, 2011). He received 16 songs and felt that none of them deserved to be rejected. In the “Reader’s Digest version”, the final effect gave the feel of a music video. The burlesque-like character of the film, one of the few things it was praised for, was – according to the director – a side effect of the drastic cuts. The latter significantly sped up the rhythm of the movie, which had been intended more as a type of a thriller (Ciment et al., 1992). Thus, the successful parts were achieved by accident, by mistake.

Despite the many years that Wenders had spent on the script, the critics immediately noticed that it combined two stories in a way that was deemed inept. The fatal, insurmountable heterogeneity haunted the film from the stage of ideas, through the 20-hour recorded material and the director’s cut, all the way to the final cinema version. It was purported that it was chaotic and unintelligible (Kell, 2010) and that half way into the film, the road movie turned into a “moralistic/sci-fi essay” (Lubelski, 1992, p. 29) with a “cheap” (Uszyński, 1993a, p. 14) and ostentatious (Hanisch, 1992, pp. 36–37) message. The first of the two stories, the one of a journey, was judged more favourably; for example, Tadeusz Lubelski wrote that it was “more Wendersian, amiably misfit and crazy, with no preconceived thesis” (Lubelski, 1992, p. 29). This shows the lenient, but never enthusiastic, attitude toward the first half of the movie, in which the protagonists travel many countries and continents, and then stop in the Australian bush, where they hide from a nuclear cataclysm. Such a rapid, albeit specious, arrival at the destination of the journey raised one of the objections.

Wenders said in an interview given to POSITIF:

Often, especially during editing, we were very concerned about this diversity: it seemed to us that the tape that was being edited was not the film we were preparing but another tape. It was quite depressing, and we wondered whether all these different films would eventually form one whole. (Ciment et al., 1992, p. 78)

In contrast, but also to show more clearly the duality of the undertaking, let us recall another statement by the director in which the depression gives way to enthusiasm:

The fact that we were constantly losing the thread of one of the two or three stories, that we were catching up with a different story in almost every scene, freed me enormously. Before, all my films were quite linear, even if there were some meanders. (Jousse et al., 1991)

What emerges from these words is the image of a director similar to the protagonists of the film, wandering and searching. Wenders describes working on the film like

he was talking about harnessing a force of nature or overcoming a difficult obstacle, not about making a work of art. It is as if the director is not creating the film, but rather trying to find his way in it.

In this sense, it seems irrelevant to ask whether we are dealing with a successful film. Wenders is perhaps just as much a director as he is a wanderer. It may have been the difficult process of combining creative ambitions with private ones that made the film partly resemble a spontaneous, personal travel journal. The complicated story of making the film is a testament to the director's determination and personal approach, as if dreams were the main binder of a heterogeneous work. By dreams I mean those desires that cannot be fulfilled by way of a plan with concrete means and objectives, because the aesthetic and affective dimension exceeds the practical benefits. The aspiration is therefore sometimes as important as the end result. Let us refer to the director's words about *Until the End of the World* in the context of failure:

You just don't have to fall into the trap that if people rave about a film, then you're actually a genius. Because if you believe the good ones, you also have to believe the bad ones – and then, every now and then, you have to believe you're full of shit. So I decided not to believe either one. [...] I really like the film for what it is. I loved *Until the End of the World*. It's really one of the finest things – in my own book – that I've done in my life. It was a total failure! It was a total failure, but it was worth it. And sometimes those movies that didn't really make it are even closer to my heart than the ones like you recorded: *Wings of Desire* or *Paris, Texas* that really made it, that never needed me anymore afterwards. And some of these other kids they're still clinging on to my coat and they never grow up, but I like them better. (Foundas & Wenders, 2011, 45'00"–46'13")

Wenders wanted to include as many of his favourite themes as possible in the film, invite as many of his favourite actors from different countries as possible, visit his favourite places, bring old, unrealized ideas to life. For example, in the roles of the couple running an inn in Hakone he cast Chishû Ryû and Kuniko Miyake, two favourite actors of Yasujiro Ozu, his master; the woman on a tram in Lisbon, who only has one line, is played by the fado star Amália Rodrigues; the director dreamt for many years of hiring Jeanne Moreau for the film. There's more:

The writer-detective is in a way the Hammett whom I had planned, but could not make. The shots in Lisbon are a result of the scenes I could not film while making *The State of Things*, because there wasn't enough money. Venice [...] was in the draft for an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel [...]. All these components kept accumulating over the twelve years of preparations for *Until the End of the World*. When an intended project waits this long for implementation, it is inevitable. (Ciment et al., 1992, pp. 77–78)

These words clearly show that the factor of dreams is not a trivial element. What he said about the soundtrack for the movie is also laden with meaning: "It was strictly wishful thinking, but wishful thinking is a very fruitful approach" (Weston & Wenders, 2015).

The objections against the film came down to an accusation of inconsistency. Critical press reviews of the cinema version usually aren't in line with the later reception, which can be traced on the Internet. Collin Kelley wrote:

There were some [viewers] who saw a diamond in the rough, who embraced it, told friends about it, and spread the rumor that Wenders would one day release a director's cut. The myth began to grow. This is how cult cinema is born. (Kelley, 2004)

A telling comment was made by writer Diane Dooley, who declares herself a diehard member of this cult, while openly admitting that she doesn't know why she likes the movie so much (Dooley, 2011). It is not a bad movie; it is dazing and disorienting. It tells of the dangers brought by the development and popularization of the visual media (the ability to see one's own dreams on screen turns out to be a destructive drug), while at the same time tempting viewers with a myriad of images. It is a multi-threaded and chaotic story, yet a coherent one, precisely because its theme is wandering. Even more paradoxically, its tone is optimistic. Those who know the story of the film's creation may have the sensation that it is self-thematic.

The relation between wandering as the theme of the plot and wandering as using and breaking numerous genre and narrative conventions is also coherent. On each of these levels, we are dealing with non-fulfilment, errors or lack of purpose. In this sense, *Until the End of the World* is an anti-epic. The accumulation of everyday elements gives the impression that the author is trying to present real life in his work. Gene, the narrator, a former partner of the main heroine, says: "I wrote an ending for my novel, whereby Sam and Claire would meet again in that same bar in San Francisco, Tosca's. I wrote it, but tore the pages apart and wrote the truth instead". The truth in lieu of the ending: it's not just about the lack of a happy ending, because the film not only does not have that, it lacks any kind of closure; the inverted image of the typewriter keys accompanying these words emphasizes Wenders' contrariness towards closure as a pattern. Thus was born a story of the incompatibility of narrative conventions with life, a motif that recurs throughout all of the director's work. His heightened interest in 3D technology in recent years proves how important it is for him to bring the film as close as possible to real life. At Berlinale 2015 he said:

In filmmaking, you can very often think in shots [...]. In 3D [...] you need to add something that makes this fluid and that relates it to your eyes. And the eye is not defined by an angle, it's defined by living moment. So we learnt that 3D is very much dependent on movement [...] and that only then space becomes something you can experience. Static space is very much a lie because it's too rigid. (Rother & Wenders, 2015, 19'25"–20'21")

This attitude has in it something of an aspiration doomed to fail, so frequently seen in its heroes, but this doesn't take away from the value of these aesthetic quests.

References to Hollywood are a significant device in *Until the End of the World*, because whatever life may be, it certainly is not a Hollywood movie. A host of genre

conventions can be found in Wenders' work. They are, however, dysfunctional if we assume that a film's function is to give the cinema viewers a sense of continuity, a haven of security (Altman, 1977, p. 42), as they lack predictability. Spectacularity is an innate feature of entertainment genres such as horror, action or science fiction. In *Until the End of the World* what is spectacular is the road itself, not the motifs of genre cinema.

Neither the brilliant Dr. Farber, who is a reference to Rotwang from *Metropolis* (Ciment et al., 1992), nor his invention arouse horror, but a reflection on the harmfulness of the ability to watch one's own dreams on screen. Even though the film avails itself of prototypes of modern devices and technologies, Wenders claims that what attracted him the most to the genre of science fiction was the freedom to speak about the present. And in any case, technology is fallible: the GPS only works on highways, the software for finding people does not work due to incompatibility between the West and the Eastern Bloc. The scenery is retrofuturistic in its own peculiar way: the women's fashion is dominated by bright colours, metal and plastic, but men wear trench coats and hats from the 1950s. The cars and jukeboxes with vinyl records are also old-fashioned. Toward the end of the movie, we learn *ex machina* that the degree of civilizational advancement allows an unqualified person to find work on the Earth's orbit. For Claire it means settling down after years of living an adventurous life. This is the only function fulfilled by the potentially attractive motif of space travel, which is a bold defiance of the science fiction convention.

Despite the presence of spy and action elements, the movie is virtually devoid of tension, and the characters involved with this convention are duds. Private detective Philip Winter, played by Rudiger Vogler dressed in a trench coat and a fedora hat, looks so much like Humphrey Bogart that his appearance alone is enough to talk of a reference to a detective film of the *hard-boiled* variety. Nevertheless, he is shy and sensitive, he can't handle a firearm, speaks in poetry, plays the harmonica and listens to bird songs. The secret agent chasing the heroes always arrives a moment too late to catch them, which seems to disappoint rather than upset him. The only act of violence he commits is to give truth pills to the interrogated. The rest of the agents are never seen on screen. Just like the nuclear satellite, they remain a mysterious, constant and potential threat, causing existential anxiety instead of cinematic emotions. The two robbers are Raymond, an elderly, ailing Buddhist, and Chico, a rock and roll drummer. They don't know what to do with the money they've robbed, or even how much they've stolen, because their loot is in currencies from all over the world.

The action potential of the chase across four continents is contrasted with the sparing, seemingly careless acting – “we are basically indifferent about all of them” (Hansisch, 1992). The camera does not focus on the characters (Wenders is known for his aversion to close-ups). Everyone is nice to each other and ordinary, at times it seems that the shots were primarily a pretext for meetings and travels for actors as well. They are not in a hurry; in fact they are slouching about a bit. Sam (the hitchhiker) walks

around at the leisurely pace of a stroller, even though he is being chased by the secret services of a few global empires. The main heroine Claire, according to Lubelski “completely devoid of feminine charm” (Lubelski, 1992), often drags her feet, she is constantly tired. Although at the plot level the heroes’ travels have the features of a mission, pilgrimage, a spectacular chase, they are shown as a trivial excursion. Despite the fact that their journey takes them down touristic routes, there is no consumerist need for collecting impressions (Bauman, 1994, p. 30). The scenic diversity and beauty of the world is presented in passing only. Claire turns her pocket camera away from tourist attractions to record dilapidated walls, old staircases, suburbs. In one of the scenes, when asked about San Francisco, she says: “I’ve been there a few times. I’ll take you to my favourite bar”, and in another: “this’ll cover half a cow in Ethiopia”; she says she has been everywhere, but she seems jaded by this fact. Her wandering is a global flaneurism (Fiuk, 2006, as quoted in: Kępna-Pieniążek, 2013, p. 153), an inability to find her own place.

The action takes place in spite, as it were, of a global threat, in the near future of 1999, when a nuclear satellite on the Earth’s orbit threatens to explode and destroy the entire planet. This catastrophic, apocalyptic/millennarianist element affects the action at three points: 1. Due to a traffic jam on a French highway caused by unrest and heightened social mobility, the main heroine chooses a less-travelled, scenic route, which sparks off a sequence of events that kick off the action; 2. The nuclear satellite explodes while the heroes are flying over the Australian desert. This causes a NEMP effect, as a result of which the journey must be continued on foot, until the protagonists come across an abandoned motorcycle; 3. All the characters, the chased and the chasers, meet at the lab of doctor Farber and his wife in a cave in the Australian Northern Territory. Due to the alleged danger of global radioactive contamination, they spend months there, bathing in a stream, relaxing in the hammock, playing music, painting, writing and talking together. The atmosphere of threat by the satellite is present in the background: in newspaper headings, TV news, in the persons of the preacher and the desperate assailant. Neither the massive traffic jam, nor the broken aircraft or atmosphere of a rural vacation are strictly catastrophic motifs, however, and the end of the world, looming already in the title, does not happen.

This transcends the problem of genre convention. The open ending is a solution typical of a road movie, the only genre that Wenders does not subvert in this film. By this move, however, he defies the narrative tradition of denouement. The film’s ending merely sets the direction for the characters’ further wanderings. Claire finds a temporary mission on the orbit. Commissioned by an ecological organization called Green-Space, she observes the Earth from space to identify pollution crimes in the oceans. Significantly, her work consists in a never ending search. Her other objective was to find a place for herself, but this does not happen; her mobility never reaches an end, or a goal within the film story. Similar is the fate of the other characters. On the day of

Claire's thirtieth birthday, they connect with her via teleconference – Gene from New York, Winter from Berlin, Raymond and Chico from Tahiti. There is no resolution and there is no journey's end.

The eponymous threat of world's end is a reference to the most extreme manifestation of faith in purpose and linearity. The lack of ending undermines the Western civilization's understanding of time, as well as the concept of a world that has its middle and its end, still extant in metaphor.<sup>4</sup> The journey ends among Australian Aborigines, who represent an alternative, cyclical approach to time. Their beliefs are particularly far from the linear understanding of history, as it is accepted that to the Aborigines the Earth has existed always. The mythical origins of the world as known to them consisted in the transformation by Supernatural Beings of the matter that had already existed. They filled the bare plains with characteristic landscape elements, with plants, animals and people (Eliade, 1973, pp. 1, 44–45; Rickard, 2017, pp. 1–2; Tuan, 1977, p. 132). These events took place at a time referred to as the Dreamtime and they are ceremonially reconstructed in rituals. To stop the rituals would mean to bring on the threat of the world's end, understood as a return to the situation from before the Dreamtime. Knowledge about Supernatural Beings and Heroes allows people to reconnect with the holy time and to symbolically recreate the world. Thus, the end of the world is not inevitable; it depends on the actions of humans (Eliade, 1973, pp. 60–67). The stationary, Australian part of the movie was shot in Utopia (the Europeanized form of the name Urupuntja)<sup>5</sup> in the Northern Territory, about 350 km north of Alice Springs. It is an area inhabited by the Mbantua people featured in the movie. According to Wim Wenders' account, the Mbantua language lacks terms to talk about the distant future, which apparently made it difficult to communicate with the seniors during negotiations for their permission to shoot a science fiction movie in their territory (Satterlee & Wenders, 2008). Yet, as already mentioned, Wenders himself did not overestimate the futuristic aspect of this endeavour. Besides, the certain kinship between the Aborigines' and director's vision of time is (probably) a mere coincidence. One way or another, the grandiose problem of the end of the world turns out to be just another dysfunctional element of tradition and another unfulfilled denouement.

As I have tried to demonstrate, the subject of wandering and of unfulfilment resonates both in the narrative and in the plot of the movie. This is a recurring motif in Wim Wenders' work, who admits being influenced by German pre-Romantic educational novels (which is explicitly testified to by his 1975 film *The Wrong Move* (Wenders, 1975),

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4 The Polish translation of the movie title blurs the ambiguity: in the German *bis*, English *until* and French *jusqu'à*, the temporary and spatial significances are pretty much equivalent, so the title may refer to both fear of the world ending and to a "journey to the end of the world" that is Claire's pursuit of her beloved from Europe all the way to Australia.

5 Since the European name was created on the basis of a phonetic similarity, and in the context of the film it appears only in detailed works concerning the filming locations, it seems that analyzing the associations with the word *Utopia* would not bring any meaningful findings. <http://www.mbantua.com.au/about-utopia/>, accessed 1.11.2016.



a rough adaptation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*). Yet he reverses the sense of these tales: "The process of spiritual, emotional and moral maturing shows a path that leads the hero from childhood toward adulthood. In Wenders' work, this process concerns only adults [...] who still seem immature and emotionally unstable" (Fiuk, 2006, quoted after: Kępna-Pieniążek, 2013, p. 198).

This is also the case in *Until the End of the World*. Sam roams the world, having abandoned his wife and son, in order to win his father's acceptance through accomplishing a dangerous mission. Claire seems more independent, but also more lost; she is still searching for her mission. She sees it in her pursuit of Sam. She is in a state of permanent crisis, that is of melancholy. The natural plot outlet for searching is a journey, which explains this director's proclivity for the road movie genre.

Identity crisis that breeds melancholy is, as theoreticians often emphasize, an important factor shaping the artistic road of new German cinema makers, including Wenders. The generational experience of Germans born shortly after the war was that of an inability to identify with the history of their own country, a sensation of broken cultural continuity and uprooting (Uszyński, 1987/1993b). The motif of abandoned and lost children, of lost, childish and forever seeking adults, characteristic of his movies, is sometimes interpreted as an effect of failed attempts at building a cultural identity.

It was probably this context that turned Wim Wenders into a cosmopolitan. One of the ways of dealing with this situation was an escape into imported American culture, and in this respect, as the director says quoting Lou Reed, "my life was saved by rock'n'roll". Besides seven feature films that Wenders made in the United States, he also shot *The Soul of a Man* (Wenders, 2003), a feature documentary that formed a part of *The Blues* series produced by Martin Scorsese as an homage to the roots of rock'n'roll. Parts of the action of *Alice in the Cities* (Wenders, 1974), *State of Things* (Wenders, 1982) and *The American Friend* (Wenders, 1977) are also located in the US, and each one of these movies grapples with the relations between Europe and the United States in its own way. In *Alice...*, for example, this is reflected in the scene showing a Chuck Berry concert somewhere in Germany, during which the protagonist, sipping on Coca-Cola, seems to be genuinely happy for the first time.

Wenders is nevertheless a European. He lives and works in Germany. He also makes movies in Portugal, France, Italy, often paying attention to the linguistic diversity of his characters. He was also the first chairman of the European Film Academy.

And yet, Eastern Europe has almost no presence in his work. In *Kings of the Road* (Wenders, 1976) it is at least visible, as the protagonists travel along the border dividing East and West Germany. And so, in the first scene we can see the eastern bank of the Elbe with a fence and watchtowers, and in the last scene we can hear shots that signal the close proximity of the border. Landscapes on both sides are also visible, but this is a boundary that is never crossed. The concept of Central Europe is all the more

non-existent to Wenders. This is absolutely understandable, given that the Iron Curtain divided the territories that were designated with this name. The majority of these territories were occupied by Eastern Europe, more palpably demarcated and perceivable as a category. We know that the director has visited the Eastern Bloc, but this did not help him overcome the sensation of its unfamiliarity.<sup>6</sup> His only possible way of portraying Eastern Europe – as *terra incognita* – is a testament to the circumstances that shaped him, and which he outgrew, as a child born in Düsseldorf, in the British occupation zone. Looking to the West was a necessity.

*Until the End of the World* for a moment takes viewers to Moscow of the year 1999, and it is a place where the Soviet Bloc still exists. This is of significance for the incompatibility of computer software, while political and social ramifications are overlooked. There is none of that visual emptiness that Wenders encountered in Budapest: the Moscow subway is as sprayed with graffiti as the French mall in another scene. The action also takes place in Berlin, but there isn't as much as an allusion to the city being divided. Apparently, the German press had an issue with Wenders making a film in Australia while the Berlin wall was going down (Hanisch, 1992).

The problem of a divided Europe is expounded in the 1993 film *Faraway, So Close!* (Wenders, 1993). It is a continuation of *Wings of Desire* (Wenders, 1987), which told the story of a wounded and divided city and featured Peter Falk and Nick Cave. This time, besides Peter Falk and Lou Reed, also Mikhail Gorbachev starred as himself, citing the words of Fyodor Tyutchev on unity and harmony that can do more than steel and blood. His guest appearance in the film is a reminder about the abolition of a strict separation between the East and the West. It is also the movie in which the only Polish motif in all of Wenders' cosmopolitan films can be found. In one of the scenes, two Berlin mafia goons are holding the protagonist at gun point. When his arms drop a bit, one of them, an unlikable type with moustache and a mullet, played by Andrzej Pieczyński, reprimands him in Polish: "Skrzydółka, skrzydółka!" [Wings, wings!].

Let us leave unanswered the question of whether this accent, probably painful to Polish enthusiasts of Wenders' cinema, may be interpreted as an example of failure of Central European culture. To a certain degree, the same reasons that split Europe into two parts were the factors that established the leitmotifs of Wenders' work: melancholy, perpetual wandering, and vain seeking of one's place, home, identity.

*Until the End of the World* has plots, intrigues and twists, but it has them in surprising abundance. It could be concluded that it is a failed attempt at telling a coherent story, which the director was unable to do, having succumbed to the charm of his own way-faring life and dreams. This is how the film was received, but it may have been an unfair

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6 In 1991 he said: "Just look at this flooding of images in cities: road signs, gigantic neons on rooftops, advertising billboards and posters, shop windows, video, newsstands, vending machines, ads on cars, trucks and buses, all kinds of infographics in taxis and in the subway, even every plastic bag has a print" (Wenders, 2002, p. 354) [...] "When I first came to a city in the Eastern bloc, it was Budapest, I went into shock: there was nothing. A few traffic signs, some ugly banners, otherwise the city was empty of imagery, of advertising" (Wenders, 2001, p. 378).

verdict. Without a doubt, the proportion of work and financial costs to the critical reception, publicity and influences was unfavourable. The movie is incommensurately little known given its spectacularity, star-studded cast and soundtrack. The critical reception of the director's cut rehabilitates the film, but it is still unsubstantial, often coming from the members of the "cult". The cult itself seems understandable: *Until the End of the World* won over the hearts of a small group of viewers – perhaps all of those who have had the chance to see it. Whether by accident or not, the story about failures failed financially and critically. Yet despite its inconsistency, or perhaps thanks to it, the film turned out to be a coherent artistic statement, presenting a failed search for purpose, for a happy ending, and for narrative structures through the lens of which people would like to see their lives.

Translated by Maja Jaros

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### Najambitniejszy film Wima Wendersa

**Abstrakt:** *Aż na koniec świata* w reżyserii Wima Wendersa to wielkie filmowe przedsięwzięcie. Tekst omawia powolny proces powstawania filmu, historię jego dystrybucji, treść i recepcję, by wskazać na niepowodzenie jako kwestię kluczową dla każdej z tych sfer. Celowość, sukces, rozwiązanie akcji, zakończenie, koniec świata – te pojęcia w kontekście omawianego filmu jawią się jako nieistotne lub niemożliwe. Główny materiał badawczy stanowią recenzje oraz wypowiedzi reżysera. Analiza treści wykazuje obecność licznych odniesień do klasycznych gatunków filmowych, które jednak okazują się dysfunkcyjne. Ważnym tematem filmu jest błędzenie, tułaczka. To motywy powracające w twórczości Wendersa, co czasem interpretuje się jako efekt poszukiwań tożsamości właściwych jego pokoleniu. W przypadku reżysera poszukiwania te wiążą się z częstym przekraczaniem państwowych granic. Nieliczne są jednak w jego twórczości i refleksji odniesienia do Europy Środkowej.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** film drogi; flanerizm; otwarte zakończenie; science fiction; marzenia

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